

Chapter 1 - History

The Arikara Indians were the first known inhabitants of the area now known as Pierre and Fort Pierre and lived in palisade forts surrounding the area. The Arikara were primarily farmers and their major crops were corn, beans and squash, but they also grew tobacco, watermelon and pumpkins.

Chevalier and Louis LaVerendrye became the first white men to leave proof of their presence in the Pierre area. The brothers were the sons of French explorer, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, who first claimed the region for France in 1743.

Shortly after the brother's exploration into the area, the Sioux Indians, who had been pushed out of Minnesota by the Chippewa, arrived at the Missouri River. Their arrival challenged the claim of the Arikara who were eventually driven out of the area by the Sioux tribe. The site of what later became the original Town, then City of Pierre, was known as Matto, a word fashioned from part of a Dakota Indian name ma-to-na-kpa, meaning Bear's Ear.

In 1803, the United States completed the Louisiana Purchase from France, which included the area that would later be named South Dakota. In September 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark anchored their canoes at the site of present-day Pierre. During that time, Lewis and Clark met with 50 or more chiefs and warriors, including the Teton Sioux. When the explorers returned to St. Louis in 1806, they described the streams full of beaver and grasslands full of buffalo and they noted the lack of trading forts in the Pierre area. This report soon attracted people interested in exploiting the riches of the region.

In 1817, Joseph LaFramboise built a fur trading post across the river from where Pierre now sits. In 1831, a representative of the American Fur Company, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., built Fort Pierre to replace the old LaFramboise trading post. In 1855, the U.S. Army bought Fort Pierre for use as a military post, but abandoned it shortly after in favor of nearby Fort Randall. Despite the army's departure, people continued to live at the site of Fort Pierre.

In 1861, the Dakota Territory was formally established. It was not until the mid-1870's that substantial numbers of settlers began to appear in the Pierre area. The Black Hills Gold Rush of 1875 resulted in many people passing through the area and Pierre became a supply and ferrying point over the Missouri River.

The Great Dakota Boom of new settlers into South Dakota occurred from 1878-1887 and resulted in the establishment of a rail line into the state. In 1880 an influx of people to the Pierre area occurred due to the rumored extension of the Dakota Central Railroad. The Dakota Central Railroad was constructed and began operations in late 1880. It was not until 1907 that a railroad bridge was constructed to cross the Missouri River at Pierre.

Land was first platted in 1877, and Pierre's first post office was established on December 16, 1880. John D. Hilger, of the firm of J.D. Hilger & Company was instrumental in naming the place "Pierre" following his arrival in 1880. Hilger urged the postmaster to name the Post Office Pierre after Pierre Choteau, Jr., the namesake of Fort Pierre Choteau. The City soon began to be called Pierre and the platted townsite was designated Pierre, Dakota (City of Pierre n.d.). Pierre government was organized on March 9, 1883, when the Territorial Legislature granted a charter. Pierre continued with its organized government until 1887 when it decided to become an incorporated city and replaced its special charter (Schuler 1998).

On February 22, 1889, South Dakota entered the Union as the 39th state. In 1890 Pierre was made the capitol of South Dakota after a drawn-out political battle between its supporters and supporters of the town of Mitchell, which was situated further east and closer to the bulk of the state's population. In the end, however, Pierre won a statewide vote by a large margin.

The first Capitol Building was a temporary wooden structure built by the City of Pierre in 1890. It stood in the southwest corner of the present Capitol Grounds. In 1908 the cornerstone for a new capitol building was

set. The present Capitol Building in Pierre opened its doors in 1910. As state government grew, the building expanded and separate office buildings were constructed (State of South Dakota 2004). One of the highlights of the Capitol Grounds is Capitol Lake. A dam was first constructed in 1913 to allow the creation of this 7 acre lake which is fed by artesian well water and drainage from Hilger's Gulch. Several improvement projects have been completed to manage the silt inflow and further enhance the usability of land in the Hilger's Gulch area (Schuler 1998).

Pierre grew to 3,656 people by 1910, which was similar in size to Rapid City and Deadwood. It "became a good connecting link between eastern and western South Dakota after the railroad completed a bridge across the Missouri River in 1907 (Schuler 1998).

The earliest development and platting of the City of Pierre centered around Pierre Street and extended northerly to the Capitol Grounds. The City has generally expanded north and east from the original townsite. However, until 1928 there was no city pathway to the riverfront. In 1928 acquisition of three outlots provided about two miles of frontage on the Missouri River (Schuler 1998).

An airfield was first built in anticipation of Charles Lindbergh's visit in 1927. The City purchased land, improved the field and got it approved by the Department of Commerce in 1929. This airfield prompted a lot of activity and was expanded and well used until the Department of Commerce determined it did not meet air mail specifications. This prompted the City, in 1937, to identify and develop a new airport at the present airport location. During World War II, the airfield was greatly expanded to serve the Army Air Corps as a satellite airfield to the Rapid City Airfield. The Pierre Airfield served as a training base for B-17 bombers during most of the war, and for fighter planes near the end of the war. In January 1945 the Airfield was placed on inactive status, and in September 1947 ownership was transferred back to the City of Pierre (Schuler 1998).

Pierre was affected by the agricultural depression of the 1920's, and the drought and Great Depression of the 1930's. By 1931, 20 percent of Hughes County workers were out of work. National relief programs resulted in many local work projects including the Works Progress

Administration (WPA) construction of a new City Auditorium. Some of the other WPA projects in Pierre included new airport facilities, a new County Courthouse, and a new governor's mansion (Schuler 1998).

In 1944, the U.S. Congress approved the Flood Control Act of 1944. The Act authorized the construction of thousands of dams and levees across the United States and led to the construction of the Oahe Dam near Pierre (Buruea of Reclamation 2004). The Army Corp began construction of the dam in 1948 and it was completed in 1962 (SDPB 2000). A 1952 flood of the Missouri River caused severe damage to the town of Pierre, making clear to the citizens of Pierre the wisdom of the Oahe Dam building project. "During peak construction years on the dam, there were from 3,000 to 4,000 persons, including children, connected with the project." (Schuler 1998, 142.)

The 1950's were a boom decade for Pierre with its population nearly doubling. In addition to the population growth fueled by the Oahe Dam project, state government and local businesses also grew substantially during the decade. "Permits were issued for 97 new businesses in Pierre between 1950 and 1959." (Schuler 1998, 238)

During the 1960's and 1970's the downtown commercial area expanded with many new businesses and/or buildings being located along Sioux Avenue. During the 1980's and 1990's businesses continued to be added in the downtown area including the Ramkota Inn and RiverCentre at the west end of Sioux Avenue in 1986. In 1979 the Pierre Mall was constructed at the intersection of Harrison Avenue and the State Highways 14/83 Bypass. Additional new commercial development has occurred in the Pierre Mall vicinity during the last few decades.